

Stephanie N. Berberick, "Review of *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (Polity)," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.1.21>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 6.1 (Spring 2017)

Review of *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (Polity)

Stephanie N Berberick

ABSTRACT "Dispossession: The Performative in the Political" is an interdisciplinary cultural text published from the conversations between Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. "Dispossession" brings the reader to key questions within philosophical inquiry including: What does it mean to be human? Which bodies are vulnerable as a result of normalizing regimes? How does precarity shift over time? What does occupation mean in regards to discipline and resistance? Which bodies are allowed to have a place and what does demanding a place do to dislocated bodies? Can non-normative people be recognized by the state without incorporation to propriety politics? How is agency complicated by the inter-related nature of life in the everyday?

Dispossession: The Performative in the Political. By Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013. 211 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-7456-5381-5. US List \$19.95.

Dispossession: The Performative in the Political is an interdisciplinary cultural text published from the conversations between Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou.

Dispossession brings the reader to key questions within philosophical inquiry including: What does it mean to be human? Which bodies are vulnerable as a result of normalizing regimes? How does precarity shift over time? What does occupation mean in regards to discipline and resistance? Which bodies are allowed to have a place and what does demanding a place do to dislocated bodies? Can non-normative people be recognized by the state without incorporation to propriety politics? How is agency complicated by the inter-related nature of life in the everyday?

The aforementioned questions are arrived at following the working through of the central question of the text: What is it to be dispossessed? Butler and Athanasiou move through dispossession as it relates to history and contemporary cultural moments to investigate this question. Examples are given of indigenous suffering via the separation from land and sovereignty rights under the auspices of global capitalism in sites such as the Niger Delta, Ecuador, and Bolivia. The reader is taken to Palestine; to the invasion of British colonialists in Australia; to Abu Ghraib. Dispossession, they show time and again, is very much a result of state-inflicted violence under "neoliberal governmentality" that "invests" "in the production and management of forms of life" by allowing some people to live at the expense of another's "slow death" (31–32). Yet Butler and Athanasiou are also careful to discuss dispossession as interpersonal as well, ultimately outlining dispossession as something that one already is and something that one becomes. An important distinction is made between "being" dispossessed—a result of being "interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment" (4)—and "becoming or being made dispossessed"—the "ensuing, derivative

condition of enforced deprivation of land, rights, livelihood, desire, or modes of belonging” (5).

To “be” dispossessed is to exist in a world where a person is not immune to the actions and words of another and thus the self can be altered irrevocably through contact with another, through feelings such as “grief, love, rage, ambition, and ecstasy” (4). To “become” dispossessed is to have something violently taken or withheld, such as in Palestine where Israel’s military occupation “destroys lives, homes, communities, lands, and infrastructural conditions of livelihood and sociability” (180). Butler and Athanasiou also nuance dispossession through illustrating how it leads to communal, political action. They do not romanticize dispossession, but do take great care to illustrate the connectedness of various aspects of life in the everyday whereby tragedy can lead to collective response (and the applicability of theory to these situations).

Dispossession: The Performative in the Political is heavy and thought-provoking, weaving between multiple nuances of being and becoming dispossessed while returning the reader to ongoing theoretical debates. Butler and Athanasiou pull from an impressive canon of thinkers, such as Adorno, Fanon, Foucault, Levinas, Marx, and Spivak to name a few. Yet one cannot help but notice the lack of references to scholarship from emerging thinkers who may write from the places and spaces of dispossession discussed in the text. Additionally, Butler and Athanasiou employ the canon of late nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers almost casually, giving little space to unpack the work they pull from, aside from an inconsistent and brief description of the scholar’s particular theoretical position. Thus, to fully engage with this text as an independent or junior scholar may mean committing to external research that not all are able to complete given roadblocks such as inaccessibility to materials or time restrictions. This begs the question: How accessible is the text to people most affected by regulatory regimes that seek to dispossess in the name of capital, property, and propriety?

Conversely, Butler and Athanasiou offer scholars of all educational levels and abilities something quite refreshing: they illustrate that no theory is ever complete, and conversation leads to more nuanced, thoughtful, and reflexive intellectual work. This is certainly a blow to the very neoliberal regimes that Butler and Athanasiou take to task, as their dialogue in *Dispossession* works against the individualistic nature of many academies and cultures. There are many instances in the text where Butler and Athanasiou trouble the thoughts of their comrade through asking for clarification and sometimes offering points of contention. Athanasiou, for example, responds to Butler’s request for clarification regarding territorial dispossession and the politics of staying still or moving by stating “that the facile equation of agency with the capacity to move needs to be problematized also from the perspective of disability studies. Such a reductive construal of agency as moving, mobilizing, or standing up privileges mobility and thus reiterates the presumption that agency belongs properly to certain regimes of bodily morphology and recognizability” (22). The respectful and astute debate between two esteemed and accomplished scholars shows readers that theory is best when it is in motion, moving between minds and growing as it shifts. *Dispossession* also shows that theory—like the scholar who pens it—changes, such as when Butler critiques their own work in *Bodies that Matter*, asking “who was this person who held these views” (51)?

Ultimately, *Dispossession* offers a great deal to readers. Through watching a conversation unfold over two-hundred pages, the reader is taken into the birthing process of theory and reminded time and again that scholarship is better when it is not created in isolation but instead born of reflexive, responsible, and reciprocal dialogue. Perhaps most importantly, the text breathes new life into what some may consider antiquated debates around subjectivity, agency, community, and the nature of humankind, illustrating that

there is much work left to be done in a world where it often seems that capital trumps compassionate collectivity.



Stephanie N Berberick

Stephanie N. Berberick is doctoral candidate in the College of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University who is also minoring in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Berberick is published in *International Journal of Communication*, *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism, & Critique*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *The New York Sociologist*. She has presented her research at national and international conferences.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.
ISSN 2469-4053